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Deepak Sarma

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VIEWPOINT

Fostering Dialogue and Interreligious Conversation

Deepak Sarma
Yale University

SINCE seeing Santosh Sivan's film, "The Terrorist," a few days ago, I have been unable to rid my mind of the haunting images of Malli, a troubled young woman who has been chosen for a mission as a suicide bomber. In this fictional account, Sivan successfully reveals that she is not merely a brainwashed fanatic but that she is as human as anyone else, despite the fact that she is planning a despicable act, the assassination of an important politician. She has fears, hopes, loves, and disappointments and is not simply an unfeeling automaton. By illustrating quite clearly her zeal and commitment to the cause for which she is fighting, as well as her willingness to die as a martyr, Sivan demonstrates the complexity of her choices and forces viewers to reconsider their instant condemnation of her

intentions. Scholars of religion(s), and especially those who are interested in the dynamic relationship between religions, such as Hinduism and Christianity, can learn a great deal from this tragic film about their obligations to the academic world and the one beyond it.

Malli believes that the only way to solve the dispute between her community and the one with which she fights is through violence. By killing a major figure in the opposition, she and her co-conspirators anticipate that their oppressed and ignored community will be able to gain an audience in the global political arena. With all eyes turned to them, they believe that they can bring attention to their plight and thus effect the change they so desperately desire. Yet, more often than not, such violence has the

Deepak Sarma will be a Lecturer in Religious Studies in the Department of Religion at Yale University in 2003-2004 and a Research Professor of the Purnaprajna Samshodana Mandiram, Bangalore India. Sarma was educated at Reed College and the University of Chicago. He has published articles in the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, the *Journal of Vaisnava Studies*, and the *Journal of the American Academy of Religions*, among others. His first book, *An Introduction to Madhva Vedanta*, will be published by Ashgate Pub. Ltd. in December 2003. His second book, *Epistemologies and the Limitations of Philosophical Inquiry: Doctrine in Madhva Vedanta*, is a revision of his dissertation and will be published by Curzon-Routledge in 2004. His primary expertise is in the Madhva School of Vedanta, though he has also published on method and theory in the study of religion. His next project is an introduction to Vedanta, to be published by Columbia University Press in 2005. Much of his work aims to alter the trajectory of western studies in Vedanta by countering the false identification of Vedanta with the Advaita school, thus redeeming the neglect of the Madhva school and establishing its importance in the understanding of Hinduism and Hindu theology.

opposite effect and increases the span and depth of the chasm between the two conflicting groups. No one wants to listen to voices which resort to violence to be heard. Still, for many, violence is thought to be the only remaining means to gaining a voice that will be heard.

How can this violence be stopped? Leaders throughout the world have tried to stop violent action through their own retaliatory violence, blockades, and global condemnation, even though such measures do not seem to work. They fail, in part, because they dehumanize and devoice the communities of the suicide bombers. In order to vindicate themselves and their own heinous actions, leaders claim that such groups are brutish and hardly deserve to be called human. In so doing, they make an already terrible situation worse, answering violence with violence. Are we destined for a Hobbesian world where violence and power defines justice?

I am confident that violence can be ended by dialogue, debate, and conversation between the conflicting parties. Communication forces those involved in the dialogue to recognize the human element that is too often ignored during violence. When two people speak to one another, each cease to be faceless enemies and each can begin to build trust and hope. They can share their beliefs and concerns and may even find places where compromise is possible. Like the viewers of Sivan's "The Terrorist," participants in dialogue can learn that their conversation partners are not cold and heartless killing machines, but that the participants have families, children, loves, and are also committed to preserving these and not destroying them. Though it is possible to kill someone with whom you have shared ideas, it is much more difficult when one recognizes that the person is human too.

Interreligious dialogue is especially suited to serve as a means to prevent violence. Many religious traditions have themselves made such activities an integral part of their institutions. Dialogue is often believed to be an important part of becoming a citizen of a particular religious world. Followers of Madhvacarya's school of Vedanta, for example, are encouraged to debate with members of other traditions in order to gain a better understanding of and certainty in their own. Christian missionaries seek non-Christians with the hopes of converting them. As long as the conversation is alive, then so too are the participants. As long as there is a conversation between the suicide bomber and her community and those in power that they wish to harm, the explosion of violence can be prevented. As long as there is conversation, there will be no bloodshed.

Scholars of religions, and religious scholars such as those in the Society of Hindu-Christian Studies, are in a unique position to facilitate such conversations. This opportunity and duty is stated explicitly in our Statement of Purpose: "[The Society] seeks to create a forum ...for the fostering of dialogue and interreligious conversation, carried forward in a spirit of openness, respect and true inquiry." Violence that we have witnessed in recent days between Christians and Hindus in India, for example, might be reduced if the Christian's voice was heard by Hindus and vice versa.

It is imperative that scholars of religion acknowledge their duties as public intellectuals whose interests also lie outside of the rarefied academy. Though we often believe that the voice from the highest ivory tower is the loudest, we are sorely mistaken. We must also try and listen to the voices from beyond the academy, lest our ivory tower come crashing down when we ignore them.